



OUR GLOBAL COVID RESPONSE

GLOBAL DISRUPTION

It was three o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon when Laura Fontaine, Director of World Relief Quad Cities, got the call. A woman in the Congolese community had contracted COVID-19. Shutdowns had already begun across much of the U.S., and World Relief followed suit, closing our offices and suspending all in-person programming.

Laura and her team talked with the woman about the things her doctor had told her. They tried to ease some of her fears regarding the virus and hoped this would be an isolated incident. But unfortunately, the virus had already started to spread, and over the next several weeks, 60% of the Congolese community in the Quad Cities would contract COVID-19.

Halfway across the globe, nearly 8,000 miles away, Moses Ndahiro and his team faced a similar situation in Rwanda when, in mid-March, the country went into total lockdown. As the team began working remotely, they turned to rapid communication tools through mobile platforms like WhatsApp to begin communicating with partners and disseminating COVID-19 prevention messages to churches and communities.

The sudden change and continued uncertainty were destabilizing, and it didn't take long for the dramatic impact that COVID-19 could have on the world's most vulnerable to become apparent.

Local currencies across the world began losing their value. Staples like bread became a scarce commodity. Markets shut down, removing a source of income for many. Oxfam predicted that the pandemic "could push half a billion more people into poverty, [setting] back the fight against poverty by a decade," and the World Food Program forecasted a famine of biblical proportion.

In the U.S., newly arrived immigrants who were still learning a new language and culture were at risk of missing out on critical health messages related to COVID-19. The restaurant and hospitality industries, which employ many new immigrants, were some of the hardest hit by the coronavirus, and many of our clients experienced devastating lay-offs.

And yet, during what was a very dark time, when we took a step back, we saw creativity, strength and persistence shine through. Fierce courage and bold love grew amidst our upturned world. Beneath the chaos, resilience bloomed.

SCARECROWS IN CAMBODIA

Brandon Prichard remembers what it was like to walk the streets of the Stoung District in Kampong Thom Province, Cambodia, in the early days of April. As the Country Director for World Relief Cambodia, he was used to gathering with local staff, checking in on savings groups or meeting up with home-church leaders.

But as virus cases began to rise across the country, Brandon noticed something eerie popping up outside of homes, on street corners and in front of local businesses — scarecrows.

These scarecrows had been set up by residents to protect their homes and businesses against COVID-19. The belief that scarecrows can ward off illness and disease is rooted in animist belief in Cambodia and would present a challenge for our staff as they worked to provide accurate prevention messaging about COVID-19.

Thankfully, our team adapted quickly. Donning masks, they made individual household visits to share awareness and prevention lessons and ensure everyone in their communities had correct information.

Lessons included a poster that illustrated prevention methods, specific handwashing instructions and symptoms of COVID-19. Every household visited was given a copy of the poster to display in their homes, and residents were encouraged to share the information with their friends and neighbors.

By late June, our 34 community-based staff in Cambodia had visited over 5,800 households in over 280 villages.



MADE FOR CHANGE

Responses like this one from our team in Cambodia reminded us that this is exactly what World Relief was created for — to respond in times of chaos and crisis and to equip communities to thrive on the other side.

We, like many other organizations, were really tested by COVID-19, but our commitment to the most vulnerable, combined with our standing in local communities, our cascade messaging model and our partnership with local churches across the globe allowed us to respond quickly and powerfully.

When our technical staff couldn't travel due to shutdowns, the churches and volunteers that we had spent years training through our Church Empowerment Zone (CEZ) model were well-equipped to share messages and carry out our programs on their own. All that was needed was a communication platform like WhatsApp for us to coordinate with local networks.

This model allowed for rapid messaging dissemination throughout communities as information cascaded down through over 3,000 of these local churches across Africa, saturating communities with accurate public health information through public awareness campaigns and leveraging trusted community voices such as religious leaders to help overcome rumors and stigma like the ones we saw in Cambodia. Just as we did with the onset of the AIDS crisis in Africa and the more recent Ebola outbreak, we worked extensively with churches to help break stigmas associated with the virus. These leaders played a critical role in dispelling rumors, locating and protecting the most vulnerable and educating the community.



Many of our staff who serve in Rwanda experienced an extended total lockdown due to the high number of COVID-19 cases. But in the midst of this hardship, local pastors from our Church Empowerment Zones (CEZ) came together to continue serving the vulnerable in their communities.

From March to September, churches from across all six CEZs in Rwanda provided food and basic necessities to 4,056 families. In addition to these families, World Relief provided support to 1,346 families throughout the country, as well as support for 350 pastors and their families.

“We are going to do the best we can with the resources God has given us to really care for the vulnerable,” said one local pastor.



CREATIVE RESPONSES

More specific responses varied by country and community, but all showcased a beautiful creativity and innovation that ultimately helped save lives around the globe.

In Kenya, our volunteers went above and beyond to reach the most remote villages in their area, strapping loudspeakers to their cars and driving through the streets to spread information and prevention messaging.

In Haiti, one of our church networks in Laurent learned how to produce hand sanitizer to supply to local markets at a time when the product wasn't easily found.

In South Sudan, our team distributed UNICEF locally made face masks to teachers and PTA members at Liech Primary School in the Bentiu Internally Displaced People Camp, a high-density camp housing almost 100,000 people.

In Sudan, we conducted weekly radio talk shows that included prevention messages and allowed listeners to call in with questions. The show included 72 drama stories about COVID-19, 42 Public Service Announcements and 4 live shows.

And in DRC, where we learned a great deal from our Ebola response, we pivoted the educational messages in our existing health programs to include COVID-19 prevention lessons.

By the end of FY20, we reached over 650,000 individuals with direct COVID-19 preventative messaging and nearly 12 million individuals through radio or community messaging initiated by World Relief.





Photo Credit: Hannah Letinich

CRISIS IN THE U.S.

Closer to home, here in the U.S., staff, volunteers, church partners and donors alike stepped up with ingenuity and generosity to serve immigrants impacted by COVID-19.

Among our offices, innovation flourished as staff and community partners found new ways to serve. In-person programs such as ESL classes, job training seminars and summer camps all moved online. Volunteer trainings became virtual, opening up new pathways for people across the whole country to volunteer.

In the Quad Cities, our team converted their food pantry into a drive-thru facility. Twice a month, from March-September, around 300 clients pulled up outside their office and were handed a bag of food through their car door. For clients without cars, food was delivered directly to their homes.

In North Texas, we saw local churches, businesses, food banks and other non-profits donate nearly \$1 million dollars worth of food to our pantry, enabling us to serve over 26,800 families across the North Texas area.

In Seattle, World Relief staff used their drive-thru food distribution to also identify clients who owned small businesses. Many of these clients were not aware that they could qualify for government assistance due to the pandemic. Together, staff worked with these clients to fill out paperwork and apply for PPP loans, enabling their businesses to survive the pandemic and beyond.

Across our U.S. office network, more than \$4 million in food was donated and distributed, allowing us to serve over 624,000 people!

COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS

Recognizing that some immigrant communities were finding it particularly difficult to trust instruction from government officials and even caseworkers from outside their ethnic communities, World Relief launched a national Community Ambassador Initiative, hiring temporary support staff from the different communities we serve to rapidly organize and provide support.

The Community Ambassadors (CAs) provided culturally and linguistically appropriate COVID-19 outreach and education to their fellow refugee, asylee and new immigrant communities. CA's were equipped with safety gear and instructed on best practices for "front porch" client training and online group education.

This much-needed initiative helped disseminate vital health messages to many who otherwise would have remained uninformed. Not only this, but it also empowered our clients to build healthier and stronger communities at the grassroots level and provided employment, field experience and resume-building for the Community Ambassadors themselves.

Together, World Relief hired Community Ambassadors from more than 14 language groups and reached more than 1,500 individuals with health and digital literacy information in cities across the U.S.

GIVING BACK

Even as we sought to support vulnerable immigrants throughout the crisis, many immigrants in the communities where we serve noticed needs and used what they had to give back as well.

Across our U.S. networks, refugees and other immigrants came together to make masks for others in their community. One such refugee was Sei Paw, a Karenni Burmese refugee who lives in Winston Salem, North Carolina. Through an initiative called Project Mask, Sei Paw and several of her friends made over 3,000 masks for frontline workers.



Brenda's heart sank when she logged on to her bank's mobile app. She'd been working at a laundromat, diligently saving money when the COVID-19 pandemic swept into Illinois. Her work hours were cut in half, and her housing arrangement became unstable when her housemates decided to move away.

Thankfully, Brenda had been connected to World Relief Chicagoland since October 2019 when she was granted asylum in the U.S. When the pandemic hit, she reached out to her caseworker. Together, they found a new apartment for Brenda to live in. And thanks to a financial gift from Renewal Church plus World Relief's emergency rent assistance, Brenda was able to pay her security deposit plus two months of rent.

Inspired by this generosity, Brenda took to social media to raise money for a man in her home country of Nicaragua who was struggling to find work amidst the pandemic. Within three days, she raised \$450 — nearly the same amount she'd been given by World Relief — and used it to send money and supplies to the man in need.

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“My first year in America I heard President Obama quote President Kennedy saying, ‘Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country,’” Sei Paw said. “That quote has guided me and led me to encourage more of my friends to get involved.”

And then there were the two brothers who were resettled by World Relief in Chicago seven years ago. They dreamed of opening up a tailor shop together, and that dream finally became a reality — in January, mere months ahead of the COVID-19 shutdown.

Faced with this new reality, the brothers wondered if their business would survive. But then, local residents started appearing at their shop — many of whom were immigrants themselves — in desperate search of masks.

Most stores were already sold out, and online shops were selling the masks at prices much higher than what these residents could afford. Soon, the brothers knew what they had to do. They pivoted their business and began making masks, finding success and even fulfilling orders from other cities and states.

HOPE IN DISRUPTION

COVID-19 disrupted our world this year, but in that disruption we have seen new doors open, and we have found incredible hope, resilience, innovation and, above all, overwhelming love.

The generosity we’ve experienced throughout this pandemic has been nothing short of a miracle, and it was made possible by people and partners like you — who sacrificed your time and resources during a year of great uncertainty, who trusted us to be the hands and feet of Jesus and to extend your compassion to those hardest hit by the pandemic. We could not have done this work without you, and we are eternally grateful for your support.

As we look to the year ahead, we see new strength in the communities we serve; in church volunteers who fought back against harmful beliefs and stigma in their villages; in immigrants who learned to use technology to help them stay connected; in staff who felt renewed confidence that they could, with God’s help, move mountains; and in a growing diversity of people from all walks of life stepping up to serve.

Thank you for being a part of lasting change in 2020. ■